

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

NEW YORK TIMES
25 FEBRUARY 1982

U.S. Says Navy Surveillance Ship Is Stationed Off Central America

By RICHARD HALLORAN
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24 — The United States Navy has for the last two months stationed a destroyer equipped with electronic surveillance devices off the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and El Salvador to gather intelligence, Defense Department officials said today.

The officials said the vessel's mission was to monitor shipments of arms from Nicaragua across the Gulf of Fonseca to anti-Government guerrillas in El Salvador and to listen with to radio traffic in the region.

The Reagan Administration has long charged that guerrillas in El Salvador have been receiving arms provided by the Soviet Union and its allies through Cuba and Nicaragua and that the Sandinist Government in Nicaragua and Cuban advisers are supporting the Salvadoran rebels.

Mission Is Termed 'Routine'

Administration officials said the destroyer's mission was "routine" and intended only to keep the United States informed. They said the ship had been in international waters at all times and its presence was not provocative.

They also said there was no parallel between the stationing of the ship off the Gulf of Fonseca and the intelligence mission of two United States destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 that led to a Congressional resolution permitting President Johnson to order ground forces into the war in Vietnam.

Pentagon officials said one destroyer that had been stationed off the Gulf of Fonseca, the 7,800-ton Deyo, returned to her home port at Charleston, S.C., today and was relieved by a sister ship, Caron. Both are among the Spruance class of destroyers, the Navy's newest.

The ships, powered by four gas turbine engines, are capable of 33 knots. Their radar could pick up small ships at sea or in the Gulf of Fonseca. Officials said the ships had listening gear aboard that enabled them to monitor radio transmissions.

Naval officers said all ships were under standing orders to defend themselves if attacked at sea. They declined to discuss special orders that might apply to the ships on that station.

The Nicaraguan Navy, according to the latest issue of Jane's Fighting Ships, consists of 200 officers and men, fewer than the full complement of 296 officers and men aboard a Spruance destroyer.

The largest ship in the Nicaraguan Navy, according to Jane's, is a 60-ton patrol craft armed with three machine guns and capable of 26 knots. Nicaragua also has four 35-ton patrol boats built in Israel that carry two small guns and can travel at 22 knots.

In 1979, after the left-wing Sandinists came to power, Nicaragua announced that it had extended its territorial waters to 200 miles. The United States has not recognized such claims, by Nicaragua or other nations, and maintains that three miles is the internationally recognized limit. Defense Department officials also said the United States reserved the right of free passage within the three-mile limit as long as a vessel was not maneuvering in a hostile manner.

Pentagon officials said Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and his deputy, Frank C. Carlucci, had been aware of the surveillance missions of the Navy ships, having been routinely briefed on such operations.

But the officials said Congress had not been notified under the War Powers Act because the ship had been ordered into international waters and was not involved in the introduction of American forces into hostilities and because there was no indication of imminent involvement in hostilities.

The Pentagon officials also said that Deyo, which is under the command of the Second Fleet, with headquarters at Norfolk, Va., had sighted many ships and exchanged recognition signals with several. But they said no foreign ship had tried to stop the American vessel.

The Defense Department declined to say, as a matter of policy, whether the ship carried intelligence experts from the National Security Agency, which specializes in electronic intelligence gathering.

In the past, the Defense Department has sent intelligence ships into areas of tension to gather information through

electronic devices and return it to Washington for analysis. In some cases, ships were fitted out for that mission. In other cases, vans with electronic apparatus were lifted aboard the decks of ships and operated by personnel from the National Security Agency.

Ship Attacked by Israel in 1967

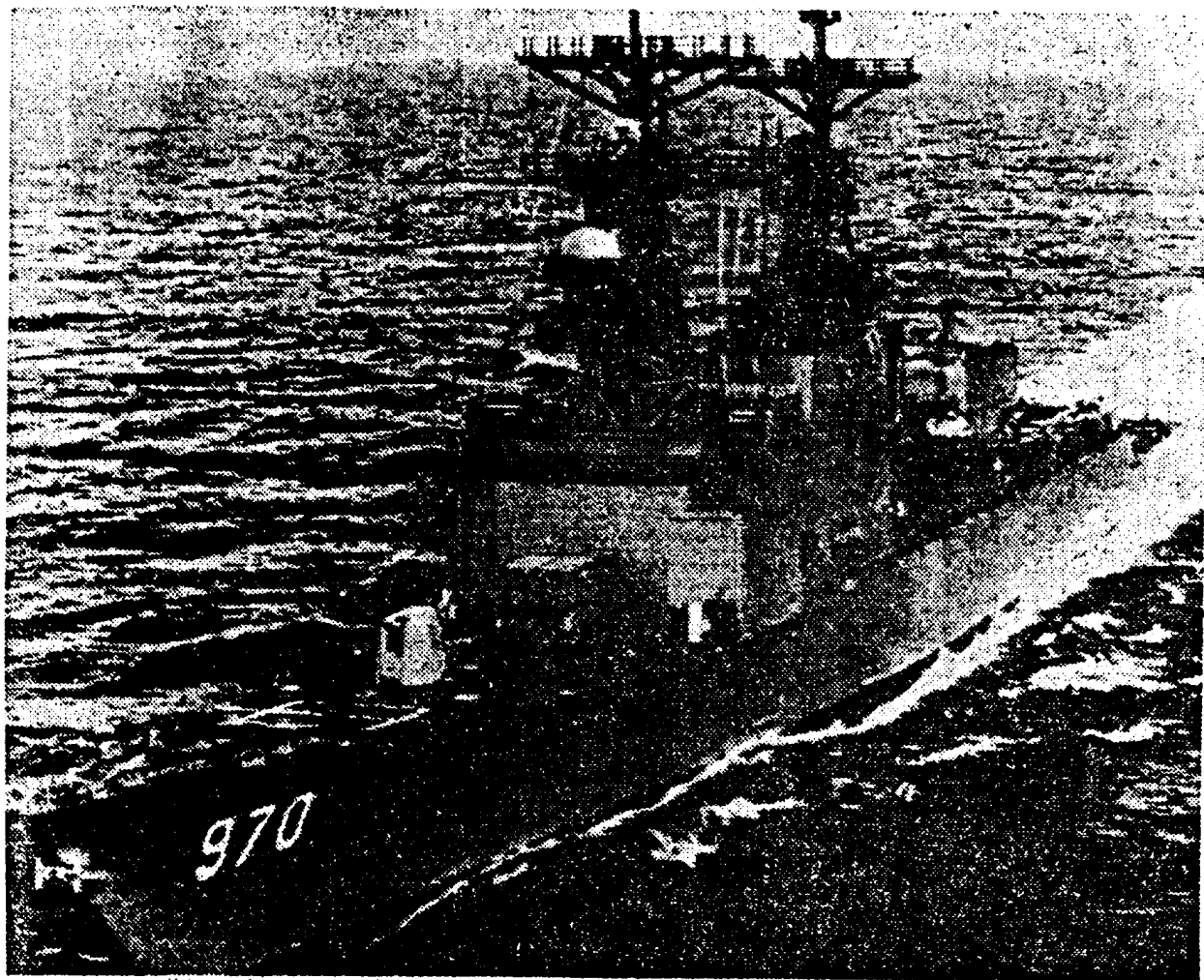
Those intelligence ships have occasionally figured in hostilities that have had far-reaching consequences. Two destroyers, Maddox and Turner Joy, operating in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam in 1964, were supposedly fired on by the North Vietnamese.

That led to the Congressional resolution under which President Johnson sent combat forces into Vietnam. It later became a symbol of excessive Presidential power and was counterbalanced by the War Powers Act.

In 1967 a Liberty ship that had been outfitted with an array of electronic devices was repeatedly attacked by Israeli ships and planes while in international waters in the eastern Mediterranean. Its mission had been to listen in on Israeli and Egyptian radio transmissions.

In January 1968 the small intelligence ship Pueblo was seized by North Korean gunboats in international waters off North Korea and forced into the harbor at Wonsan. Her crew was held captive for nearly a year.

CONTINUED



A photograph released yesterday from United States Navy archives shows the destroyer Caron, which is now deployed in the Pacific off El Salvador and Nicaragua. The vessel is equipped with electronic surveillance devices.